THE POWER OF BIRTH
Acts 2:43-47
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> Many miracles and wonders were being done through the apostles, and everyone was filled with awe. All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed. Day after day they met as a group in the temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved. (Acts 2:43-47)

There is a marvelous line somewhere in Carl Sandburg's Lincoln saga which describes the time just prior to the Civil War....."Something was dying and something was being born." Something is trying to be born in the second chapter of Acts. Something altogether new is described in that text. Something is in the process of becoming. The Acts of the Apostles is, essentially, the pre-natal and birth record of the most important movement in all of human history.

The believers, those stubborn, stalwart souls who stayed together after Jesus was crucified, after the resurrection and his disappearance, were in Jerusalem. They stayed close to one another. They met each day, apparently, in the temple. They ate meals together. They were so close that they sold their belongings and live communally, according to their needs. They sang a lot. They prayed a lot. They were consistantly happy. They lived with a sense of barely restrained awe at what God had done and a sense of unrestrained joy and anticipation.

Some of the newness resulted in schemes that didn't work. The early experiment in communal living was discontinued because it didn't do what the community hoped it would accomplish. But the concern for the needs of one another found other expressions. The verbal picture is of a group living in two worlds, one of which was dying and the other in the process of birth.

The power of that idea is lost on us, I fear, although the idea of birth itself retains great strength. There is no more evocative event than human birth. It has a power of its own, almost mystical. Birth evokes, inherently, a sense of awe, a sense that life is larger and more profound than our individual lives. There is joy at birth, nearly always. Birth signals newness, new possibilities, new hopes and dreams.

The early Christian Church didn't have much going for it: a tiny speck on the map of the world: a handful of souls in the millions upon millions of people Rome counted as subjects. The early Christian Church had no money, no influential leadership, no army, no plans. It did, however, have the power of its own birth. It had the simple certainty that God intended it to be: that the risen Christ would give it whatever resources it needed. And that was sufficient.

Two thousand years have passed and for a variety of reasons our religion is different from the experiences of the first believers. If Acts 2 is the literary equivalent of birth and infancy, our religion, I suppose, would qualify as middle-aged, at least. Certainly mainline Christianity is not notorious for its excitement and vitality.

The late Harry Golden, witty editor of the South Carolina Israelite commented acidly: "If I were faced today with the decision my ancestors faced.....become a Christian or die.....I would pick a church fast. There is nothing to offend me in the modern church. The minister gives a talk on juvenile delinquency once a week, reviews a movie next week, then everyone goes downstairs and plays bingo. The first part of the church they build these days is the kitchen. Five hundred years from now, people will dig up these churches, find the steam tables, and wonder what kind of sacrifices were performed." (see Raines, New Life in the Church, p. 75)

More to the point, there is a built in tension in the church between the vision of what we could be and the reality of what we are. We dream dreams about the Kingdom of God, but spend most of our time talking about the color of paint for the walls.

Daniel Jenkins is an Englishman who wrote an important book a number of years ago under the title, The Strangeness of the Church. In it Jenkins maintained that the church was strange precisely because it seems, on occasion, to know the secret to rebirth. Unlike other organizations which are born, come to maturity and die, much like living things, the church keeps being reborn - Jenkins maintained. It's true. Old churches, crusty, traditional, venerable old churches keep showing evidence of new birth.....New members - young people, saying yes to faith and love and hope and Jesus Christ - adults deciding to be baptized. Beyond that internal vitality, two things will happen in the life of this church in the next thirty days which an old, wornout institution simply couldn't handle. In two weeks a group of members of the church will board a van and travel to Scotts Run, West Virginia, and from there take a Mobile Health Fair into some remote mountain villages. Because of something happening in the life of this Christian community in Columbus, Ohio, some folks in West Virginia will encounter professional medical attention, nutritional education, dental hygiene for the first time in their lives. And then, a week later - 125 children from the Eastside of Columbus will begin a six week, daily program of education, recreation and skills development, in a program called Rainbow '82 which will happen because of something about the life of this congregation; something strong and new; something always present, but always looking for a way of being born.

The life of the church is renewed and reborn when the church decides to follow Jesus Christ. The same dynamic happens individually. We Presbyterians shy away from the idea of personal rebirth, however. We are much too restrained to give in to the emotionalism of the born-again movement. Unfortunately, we have forgotten the fact that rebirth is a process and not an event. In our disagreement with the tactics of the evangelicals we have very simply eliminated the experience altogether. That's too bad because there is great power in birth, and great personal potential in the idea of individual rebirth. The psychological disciplines know that, even if the churches have forgotten it.

Sometimes the opportunity for rebirth in the sense of personal renewal comes after a devastating personal crisis: in fact, sometimes the crisis is necessary for the birth to happen. Sometimes new doors open only after old ones slam shut. Sam Keen is a theologian who lived through a classic midlife crisis and later, reflecting on his pilgrimage, wrote:

> "Any radical turning point in the life of a person or a culture - adolescence, the death of a child or a friend, crippling disease, divorce, retirement, defeat in war - involves a death of the old and, hopefully, rebirth of the new. Failure," Keen observes, "gave me a chance to start over."
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> (Beginnings Without End, preface)

Sometimes personal rebirth happens in a situation that feels like death itself: sometimes we have to fail in order for a new and better plan to emerge. Sometimes a kind of rebirth happens when we experience the actual death of a parent, or spouse, or friend: sometimes personal rebirth happens after a divorce, when an individual - out of the broken pieces of life - puts something new, stronger, and bigger - together.

But sometimes rebirth is an even slower, and less intense process, not unlike physical growth. Sometimes rebirth is a growing into awareness that begins imperceptibly and after years of thinking and struggling and praying, flowers on occasion, dramatically and beautifully. That is how it is for most of us. And sometimes rebirth doesn't seem to be happening anywhere, we feel stale. There doesn't seem to be any new possibilities on the horizon. Sometimes the power of birth needs an intentional assist. Sometimes you and I are called to look honestly at the old world in which we are living, and to decide to change it some: actually to be more generous; actually to take the coat from our back and give it to the person who has none; actually to turn the other cheek, or forgive the offender we so enjoy disliking; to see how our own dullness is deadening our marriage and family and simply to decide to love and be reborn. Sometimes, very simply, you and I are called to say "no" to the old world, the old comfortable self, and "yes" to the possibility of newness. For instance, to say no to the prejudice we cling to as the last fading remnant of some dying racial superiority because we know it is wrong; to say yes to grace and honesty and love in ways that are unusual and untraditional and new.

There is power in that. There is power in the birth of a new person. Power and joy and a sense that the future is full of hope. The promise is that God is always working to make us new; to open new possibilities, to produce new growth in us, make us bigger and better and fuller persons then we thought possible. The promise of Christianity - suggested so simply and innocently by the infant church - is that in obedience to Jesus Christ - we become part of a whole new creation, not unlike being born again. AMEN.